



Reflections on Temporality in Netherlandish Art

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For many decades, contrasts between southern and northern Renaissance and early modern art have been framed in terms of the mutable relationship between optics and space. For instance, the scrutiny given to the history of linear perspective has tended to make art historians view Italian art in a specifically spatial mode. While the origins and interpretations of Italian perspective are too numerous to recount here, it is safe to say that the spatial model of representation associated with perspective was first articulated by Erwin Panofsky in 1927. Showing how Italian artists constructed an image of unchanging and infinitely extended space emanating from a given spectatorial viewpoint, Panofsky argued that space conceived in this way was fundamentally modern – systematic, measurable and mathematical.¹ In contrast, Netherlandish art has often been characterized as embodying an anti-perspectival mode that focuses on the optical rather than the spatial side of the equation. Discussing how and why Johannes Kepler understood the retinal image as a picture (*ut pictura, ita visio* or ‘sight is like a picture’), Svetlana Alpers has suggested that northern art developed along Keplerian lines. With its scrutiny on the quality of objects in sight (their sheen, texture and uniqueness) rather than their placement in absolute space, Netherlandish art suggests a world given to the eye, not a world ordered for the eye. If Italian art was beholden to Alberti’s window, a figuration that confirmed the position of an *a priori* viewer and presented the ‘picture as an object in the world’, then Dutch art, in contrast, was beholden to the model of the camera obscura, in which the view itself took priority, ‘taking the place of the eye’ and leaving the matter of space ambiguous.² Thus, in an entirely different way, northern opticality, with its association with light and the retinal image, could also be seen as fundamentally modern.

Whether either of these characterizations is entirely reliable is of less importance here than that in both instances, the dominant questions that are asked concern the imbrication of vision and space. Art historians have long been concerned with how conceptions of pictorial space and optical effects contributed to newly emerging, and ultimately modern ways of seeing and representing. However, after decades in which these kinds of questions have held sway, a shift in emphasis seems to be occurring. While space once seemed to be the primary marker of early modernism (and is still a critical rubric for understanding issues of representation in the Renaissance and after), increasingly it is the temporality of art that is the focus of discussion. This is due, in part, to a more general shift in early modern studies away from standard iconographical interpretive models and toward theories of reception, attention and

Detail from Willem Claesz Heda, *Still Life with Nautilus Shell*, 1640 (plate 1).

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spectatorship, a shift that is reflected in many of the papers included in this special issue of *Art History*.³

Among Netherlandish art historians, this can hardly be understood as new. Flemish and Dutch art have long been associated with and interpreted through issues of existential and moral temporalities. Through the familiar themes of *vanitas* or *memento mori*, Netherlandish painting has often been understood to mark the brevity of earthly life through signs of natural decay and human depletion, framing mortal weakness and degeneracy in eschatological terms. Landscapes, still lifes, portraits, church and domestic interiors and tavern scenes evoke human achievement and ambition, but also, through the inclusion of skulls, mouldering organic material, distant horizons and evidence of sin and worldly pride, they prognosticate the bodily death that serves as a divinatory prelude to the end of all time. While these details may be evidence of the Reformation's transformative effects and the peculiar political, economic, colonial and social mandates of the Low Countries, they are also the stock inventory of genre pictures and as such, they are often taken to embody the inherent connection between time and morality in Netherlandish culture.

However, many of the papers in this issue rework questions of temporality in new and interesting ways that are quite different from how they have been studied in either the Italian context or previously in Netherlandish studies. In Italian art history, questions of temporality traditionally have been viewed through the lens of classicism and history. One of the more clichéd views of the Italian Renaissance, traceable to Jacob Burckhardt, is that, newly (self-)aware of their place in the world, Renaissance artists and humanists began to see themselves as masters of their own historical present. Seeking to define themselves in response to the recovery and refurbishment of a perceived, lost history of antiquity, Burckhardt's Italian Renaissance thinkers developed a form of classicism that putatively elided medieval eschatology in favour of rationality and a new historical self-consciousness. But 'classicism' in this context was also a product of what Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood more recently identify as *anachronism*, a nostalgic recasting of the past through practices of substitution and repetition that also demonstrates the complex relationship between time and history.⁴ Classicism first materialized in the repetitive displaying, copying and reworking of both literary and visual ancient sources (what Hans Baron called 'a single-minded, even militant dedication to antiquity'⁵) that characterized Italian humanist and artistic practices from the time of the fifteenth century. However, far from being an effort to recover historical memory, Renaissance classicism was deliberately anachronistic, or as Nagel and Wood argue, 'anachronic', a word chosen to define the peculiarly forward-oriented, futuristic template of the past that marks Renaissance art and art theory.⁶ Indelibly tied to archaeology, art theory and the writing of history, classicism nevertheless did not guarantee the specificity of the past through careful reconstruction. Instead, it presented the past anachronically as an affect of the present. This model is distinctive to Italy, where the unearthing of antique works was a regular occurrence. As Leonard Barkan has shown, the parade of newly discovered Greco-Roman works engendered a whole host of ancillary practices and interactions – restoration, collecting and copying, rhetorical description, distribution through drawings and prints, quotations in various Renaissance works – that contributed to the production of classicism in both an academic and cultural sense.⁷

These same practices were subsequently glamourized and institutionalized by Giorgio Vasari in both the *Lives of the Artists* and in the statutes of the Florentine academy.⁸ From Vasari's point of view, antique objects became recognizable as

cultural markers of the classical past only when their historicity was masked and they were consistently re-framed in spatio-temporal terms as timeless objects of Michelangelo's scrutiny, or more generally, as models for works produced by his contemporaries. While Vasari's chronological model was destabilized by his anachronistic tendencies, nevertheless his approach to the history of art firmly equated temporality to duration. Classicism was the answer to the problem of accounting for artistic development over the *longue durée*. In contrast, in Netherlandish artistic traditions, the focus on the ordinary and everyday brought into relief a temporality less beholden to historical duration than to the brief and ephemeral. Jacques le Goff has argued that modern constructions of time were the result of a rising merchant culture in Europe in the late Middle Ages.⁹ The eschatological ramifications of medieval 'church time' were slowly superseded by a growing demand for regularity required by a new merchant culture – hence his term: 'merchant's time'. The equation in commerce between money and time had a critical effect on what would later become the economics of industrial revolution.¹⁰ The daily clock's rigidity implied not only the disciplining of the lower-class body, but moral associations between punctuality, labour and punishment and the valuation of time in economic terms.¹¹ These aspects of mercantile and, later, industrial economies negate the concept of duration by cutting time into discrete units, each with its own function, necessarily without teleological interconnection. Like Madame Louvigny, who had to move from her rooms in the Hôtel d'Épernon because, in striking every quarter, half and full hour, the Épernon's clock 'cut her life into too many pieces', our impression of modern time is that it organizes economic quantities and disciplines the body in ways that are antithetical to duration.¹²

But as the papers in this issue reveal, for all that Dutch art contributed to and resulted from an expansive mercantile culture, Le Goff's thesis is too reductive to explain painting's temporalities. If it is true that the effect of genre pictures is to apportion out the various activities of everyday life, creating discrete parcels of time devoted to work, meals and play, so too there is a kind of presentness in Dutch pictures, a refusal to extend beyond the frame that belies the kind of duration referenced in Italian art. For example, a pocket watch in a Willem Claesz Heda still life symbolizes the moral constancy of mercantile time, but also forces the viewer to confront the alienating, existential brevity of measured temporal units (plate 1). As Thijs Weststeijn points out, for Samuel van Hoogstraten, pictures, unlike histories that unfold over time, operate on the principle of *oogenbliklijke daedt*, or the 'blink of an eye'.¹³ In van Hoogstraten's view, the temporal dimension of art is manifested in the momentary, rather than the enduring. But several of the papers in this issue complicate that idea of the instantaneous nature of Dutch art. Instead, they suggest that the modes of attention solicited by Dutch paintings require reflection on changing temporal states of perception and attention. For instance, as Joanna Woodall shows, the meal still life, with its ambiguous play on the table/ tableau, suggests that consumption by mouth, nose, or hand is equivalent to consumption by eye. Requiring a shift from one sense to another, the still life reveals the inability of the eye to capture the passage of time marked by the meal's preparation, ingestion and eventual spoilage. The picture may be intended to convey the blink of an eye, but it does so only to the extent that it indicates loss or disappearance (in a blink, after all, the eye is closed) of the temporal connection between different embodied acts. If this kind of still life is, as Woodall suggests, a model of perception itself, then it is one that has a melancholic cast. It encourages an understanding of time as an indeterminate affect of perception, rather than as a reliable measure of quantity. In

a slightly different vein, Bret Rothstein reorients our perception of what have often been taken to be inherently moralizing pictures, and shows how they elicit active and discerning participation from the viewer, who is called upon to enter the play of wit and recognition required by tavern scenes. This form of engagement opens up the work narratively and relies on the specific *habitus* of the viewer who can understand the rules of the game. In both these cases, the authors point toward the ways in which Dutch paintings provoke attentiveness that not only unfolds over time, but also brings into relief the elusive and changing nature of perception and reception.

A concept closely associated with Alois Riegl, attentiveness has deep roots in the history and historiography of Dutch art, and it has much to do with why issues of temporality, rather than space, inform the literature. Celeste Brusati, Christopher Heuer and Angela Vanhaelen all address the problem of attentiveness and its temporal dimensions in different ways. For instance, even when the subject is perspective, questions of attentiveness seem to take precedence over questions of space. As Brusati suggests in her article, Dutch art that employs perspective has to be understood in terms of the inquisitive attention it solicits. Pieter de Hooch's domestic interiors, Van Hoogstraten's peep boxes and Pieter Saenredam's distorted, multiple-perspective church interiors invoke what Brusati calls the metaphor of the threshold rather than the Albertian window. For artist-theorists like Van Hoogstraten and Hans Vredeman de Vries, the process of rendering the visible cannot be fulfilled if the model of vision itself is taken to be static and stationary. Moving constantly, vision is an affect of the constantly fluctuating nature of light and the consequences that this fluctuation has for appearances. In a De Hooch interior, the eye travels from window to doorframe to courtyard, actively traversing the many thresholds offered to view. It is this kind of approach that also reveals why the idea of the camera obscura holds such sway in Dutch practices. It is not so much that the camera obscura presents a true picture of nature, but that it demonstrates the constantly shifting quality of vision and the visible. The pictures seen in the camera obscura in this pre-photographic era were not, after all, blink-of-the-eye images that arrested movement. Rather they consisted of constantly shifting shadows and light cast from the world outside. For Brusati, what makes the Dutch exploration of perspective unique is that it represents an attempt to pictorialize and engage a model of vision that embraces the 'temporal dimensions of real-time viewing'.¹⁴ Dutch perspective, unlike its more static Italian counterpart, models the temporal attentiveness that informs perception.

The historiographic stakes of temporality are also elaborated at length by Heuer in his article on Hercules Segers. As Heuer suggests, Segers' work has posed a problem for historians of Dutch art because it defies classification and cannot be made to fit within the chronological structure of art history. Is he an eccentric outlier whose work should be understood as no more than an anomalous footnote on the otherwise orderly progression of Dutch art, or are his idiosyncratic tendencies (in both practice and form) indicative of certain primal features of seventeenth-century visual culture and aesthetics that get overlooked or intentionally ignored in mainstream histories? What, in essence, does Segers' work tell us about Dutch art in general, if anything? Segers' monoprints seem anachronistically avant-garde and modern before their time. Coupled with the fact that they do not readily submit to dating, and that the images are often palimpsests of the ones that came before, Segers' prints require art historians to rethink the very idea of chronology, development and progress. In this sense, then, Segers' landscapes bring into relief the temporal problematic that lies at the very heart of our discipline.

However, more importantly, Heuer shows how Segers' prints also invoke the distinction made by Van Hoogstraten between images that look like nature, and

I Willem Claesz Heda, *Still Life with Nautilus Shell*, 1640. Oil on board, 595.5 × 78.5 cm. Aachen: Suermondt-Ludwig Museum. Photo: © The Art Archive/Suermondt-Ludwig Museum/Collection Dagli Orti.



those that are constructed like nature. The etchings incorporate chance (Heuer uses the wonderful phrase ‘controlled ruins’ to describe them), overpainting and a gritty, almost visceral materiality that contravenes the principle of repeatability signified by printing itself. The pictures imitate, in their very process, the changes that occur in the landscapes they represent. Through their insistent materiality, the prints engage the viewer’s attentiveness to process and facture. At the same time, Segers’ etchings operate against the principles of spatial extension and legibility that would come to be associated with landscape painters like Jacob van Ruisdael. Embodying the idea of time as non-human and world-bound, Segers’ radically overworked landscapes suggest, both in their manufacture and content, a world that is, in Heuer’s words, ‘measured beyond clocks’.¹⁵ The time indicated is neither historical nor apocalyptic, but is enduring in a geological sense and exerts a force far beyond human intervention. The prints are therefore the exact opposite of instantaneous records of a ‘view’. Segers’ etchings disregard the rapidity and efficiency of printing and imitate instead the glacially paced transformations of the earth itself. Parsing a distinction between time seemingly under human control, and time that is not necessarily divine, but is inexorable, Segers’ landscapes deflect both interpretation and a temporal narrative.

Heuer ends his article with a short discussion of Segers’ still life of a skull. The skull is perhaps the most hackneyed and predictable of all iconographical symbols in Dutch art. And yet, like many such conventional symbols, the skull’s meaning is mutable. In her article, Rose Marie San Juan questions the conventional reading of the skull in the realm of anatomical inquiry, a field that was rapidly expanding in Italy and the Netherlands by the end of the sixteenth century. As she points out in her study of Andreas Vesalius’ *De humani corporis fabrica* (1543), the skeleton, with its multiple articulated joints, demonstrates the always-immanent possibility of human movement, and is ‘reanimated’ in the treatise as evidence of the anatomist’s implicit understanding of the relation between dead and living bodies. But the line

between the living and dead is tenuous and indeterminate, a fact made explicit in the treatment of the separate skull. Vesalius' treatise does not show it from a perspective in which the face would be recognizable as such. This effectively reorients the skull as a head detached from a body – we see the hollow where the spine and neck connect to the cranium. The skull is thus no longer simply a programmatic trope of death, but instead alludes to the liminal zone between life and death where knowledge itself is also understood to emerge. Similarly challenging the conventionality of the skull, but with a different interpretive outcome, Heuer points out how Segers treats this conventional symbol of *memento mori* much as he would a landscape, and in so doing makes it stand for the irrelevance of human time in the face of geological time. Thus in both cases the skull makes visible not simply the spectre of death, but also brings the viewer's attention to the uncanny relationship between being and time.

Attentiveness may be indelibly associated with Dutch art, but as Vanhaelen suggests, what constitutes the right kind of attentiveness has long been subject to dispute. Returning to the north/south distinction, Vanhaelen begins her essay with a quote from Joshua Reynolds. In contrast to the Italian art he favours, Reynolds associates the subject matter of Dutch art with the dullness of everyday life, and sees value only in its formal qualities and consummate realism. For Reynolds, the great skill of Dutch artists lies in their ability to render the beauty of everyday objects, but the resulting pictures are often boring in their repetitiveness and lack of larger meanings (as Vanhaelen points out, iconographical analysis seems designed expressly to multiply the meanings of objects in Dutch art that otherwise seem unnervingly devoid of significance). The tension between Dutch art's focus on everyday minutiae and the tedium that these small details might induce forms the core of Vanhaelen's inquiry. What, she asks, are the philosophical and historical stakes in the long-standing equation between Dutch art and boredom? Focusing on three formal aspects associated with Dutch art – sheen, suspension of time and attentiveness – Vanhaelen argues that while each has been associated with the rhetoric of boredom, this has not been purely to negative effect. In fact, she argues, boredom is a highly productive concept for thinking through how the realism and temporality of Dutch painting inform the 'emergent dynamics of modern subjectivity'.¹⁶

The banality of Dutch art is often associated with the materialism of a rising bourgeois culture. The skilfully rendered sheen and lustre of objects in paintings is sometimes seen as a degenerate investment in things rather than ideas. As Vanhaelen argues, Hegel celebrated the sheen of objects in Dutch painting because for him they reflected the new Dutch Protestant spirit, freed from both monarchical and religious strictures. For Hegel, Dutch painting exploits the ordinary and everyday in a way that achieves a balance between self and world, and expresses the communality of Dutch Protestant values. However, this absorption into sheen poses dangers. Intoxicated by a world of surfaces and visual effects, the viewer loses his or her connection to the things depicted and the communal values that unite them. Drawn in by sheen, the viewer's gaze dissolves the picture's unity, splintering the brilliant array of colours that define objects into discreet, dull dabs of paint of no intrinsic worth. Sheen may, on the one hand, signal the equalizing power of the everyday and the autonomy of Dutch people, but on the other, it is also 'profoundly ambivalent' because, in its boring, repetitive focus on surface over content, it reduces meaning to meaninglessness.¹⁷ In another vein, for Roland Barthes, the sheen of Dutch art disguises the operation of alienation by 'lubricating' the visual economy of desire and objects that structures capitalism.

On the other hand, as Vanhaelen points out, boredom has come to be theorized as both a product of modern alienation and a condition of freedom or of possibility. Elizabeth Goodstein sees boredom as the inevitable result of a sweeping and democratizing expansion of scepticism that is intrinsic to modernity. Georg Simmel views it as a necessary defence mechanism against the alienating effects of modernism. Martin Heidegger, on the other hand, sees boredom as a liminal experience in which, as Vanhaelen states, ‘being and time are suspended or drawn out and thus made conspicuous’.¹⁸ It is a state that offers possibilities because it illuminates the passage of time itself and the subjective conditions of everyday experience.

This notion of boredom as a liminal state in which time is suspended and a certain self-reflection can take place complicates attempts to define attentiveness in Dutch art. Riegl views Dutch painting as an expression of the Dutch Protestant values of autonomy and intersubjective equality. For Riegl, Dutch portraiture solicits an attentiveness that depends on ‘suspension of action, distant detachment, and a lack of meaning’ – three aspects that are meant to guarantee that a disinterested and respectful communing relationship exists between the viewer and the sitters in the portraits. But these same three aspects are also apt descriptions of boredom or alienation. As Vanhaelen argues, this shows that attentiveness and boredom are much more alike than they are different. While Riegl struggles to distinguish boredom from proper attentiveness, it is what boredom reveals about attention that counts. Because attentiveness is mutable and changes and shifts like the light and shadows of a camera obscura, it moves readily from ethical engagement to cold indifference, from solicitous empathy to salacious desire. Boredom may be dependent on the suspension of time, but, as a form of inattentiveness, it also makes clear the temporal shifts that attentiveness itself involves. In boredom, time either seems to slow down to a snail’s pace (the Mahler symphony that seemingly never ends) or goes missing (the critical paragraph of an academic paper that wasn’t heard when the listener drifted off). What it does not do is tick by in Le Goff’s regular, measurable, mercantile minutes.

Notes

My comments reflect my role as a participant at the conference at the Vancouver Art Gallery, but also as a specialist in Italian Renaissance and early modern art history. The general and brief observations made here respond to the essays by considering a shift in approach to the long-standing comparison between southern and northern art.

- 1 Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. Christopher S. Wood, New York, 1991.
- 2 Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*, Chicago, IL, 1983, 45.
- 3 To list just a few of the many prior studies that have contributed in different ways to this shift: John Shearman, *Only Connect: Art and the Spectator in the Italian Renaissance*, Princeton, NJ, 1992; Thomas Frangenberg and Robert Williams, eds, *The Beholder: The Experience of Art in Early Modern Europe*, Aldershot, 2006; David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, Chicago, IL, 1991.
- 4 This idea is made explicit in Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance*, New York, 2010, but something similar informs Leonard Barkan’s far-reaching study, *Unearthing the Past: Archaeology and Aesthetics in the Making of Renaissance Culture*, New Haven, 2001.
- 5 Classicism is here understood in the early Renaissance as a remarkably polyglot absorption of antique texts and letters, rather than the highly refined aesthetic programme of academic classicism that emerged much later in France. Hans Baron, *The Crisis of Early Italian Renaissance*, Princeton, NJ, 1966, 4.
- 6 Nagel and Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance*, 13.
- 7 See, for instance, his analysis of the discovery and reaction to the Laocoön. Barkan, *Unearthing the Past*, chapter 1.
- 8 See Karen-edis Barzman, *The Florentine Academy and the Early Modern State: Discipline of Disegno*, Cambridge, 2000.
- 9 Jacques Le Goff, ‘Merchant’s time and Church’s time in the Middle Ages’, *Time, Work and Culture in the Middle Ages*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, Chicago, IL, 1980, 417–33.
- 10 This is the argument made by E. P. Thompson in ‘Time, work-discipline and industrial capitalism’, *Past and Present*, 38, December 1967, 56–97.
- 11 Michel Foucault draws attention to the punitive function of time as a sign of modern discursive disciplines of the body. *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York, 1979, 6.
- 12 For the reference to Madame Louigny, see Alfred Franklin, *La mesure du temps*, vol. 4, *La vie privée d’autrefois*, Paris, 1888, 139.
- 13 While contrasting painters to historians, Hoogstraten coins what Weststeijn identifies as a neologism *oogenbliklijk* or *oogenblikkig* (meaning ‘instantaneous’). Hoogstraten himself says that ‘a play [or history] differs from a Painting in that it comprehends a particular time, place of action in every act; whereas a Painting shows just one momentary action or scene.’ Thijs Weststeijn, *The Visible World: Samuel Van Hoogstraten’s Art Theory and the Legitimation of Painting in the Dutch Golden Age*, Amsterdam, 2009, 185.
- 14 Celeste Brusati, this issue.
- 15 Christopher Heuer, this issue.
- 16 Angela Vanhaelen, this issue.
- 17 Vanhaelen, this issue.
- 18 Vanhaelen, this issue.